

"Houses are like people - some you like and some you don't like - and once in a while there is one you love." ~ Lucy Maud Montgomery

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring rural American culture. This is episode 26, Custom Home Customs. Last week I got a little bit rant-y, and I'm likely to do it again in the future. But for today, I am - and maybe you are, too - looking for a bit of an escape from everything going on in the world right now. So for just a bit, let's spend some time building some castles in the air.

I still have hope for getting started on building our new home before TOO much more time has gone by. And likely so is my builder, if only because every delay gives me more time to come up with bright ideas.

But sometimes, instead of trying to come up with just one more change to the plans, I come up with old traditions surrounding the building of a new home that I might want to incorporate. Some of them are somewhat more modern, and some are very old indeed. Let's walk through some of them, and you can think about which you might want to incorporate into your new home, or even your current home in some cases.

One of the oldest customs is to ensure the prosperity of those who will live in the house by burying a coin in the foundation. It's possible that it goes back at least as far as Roman times. And, Romans being Romans, equally possible that they filched the idea from somebody else.

In modern times (and by that, I mean about 1600 on), the usual practice is to place a coin struck in the year the home is being built in the foundation during construction. The folklore around it says that this means the homeowners will always have some money at home, which means they will be prosperous. (Yes, I know, but it's folklore. Don't over-logic it, or you'll just get a headache).

This is one of the easier customs to follow when you build your own home. I've even spoken with old carpenters who place a coin of the current year in door frames before they trim them in. They do this both during new builds and remodels. This was a way to keep track of what portions of a house were original, and which were modified. When work was done on a house, if they found a coin in the doorframe, they knew the build date and about what to expect. Then, when they finished their own work, they would replace the original coin and add a new one with the year of the remodel on it. So the

next carpenter to work there would know to expect original and modified elements ahead!

So, if you're building later this year, start collecting coins that have this year stamped on them! And don't forget to put some under the first step of each run of stairs to make sure that wealth continues to "flow" through the house!

A variation on this idea (if you're Catholic) is to bury St. Benedict's medals in the four corners of the foundation. These are believed to protect the house and its inhabitants. Modern practice sometimes requires more than 4, since houses are less frequently simple rectangles anymore. And some recommend placing more medals halfway along very long walls, even without an extra corner thrown in. Other variations on this theme include St. Joseph medals (he was a carpenter, and his influence is supposed to ensure good craftsmanship), or relics or bottles of holy water.

It's pretty easy to wrap your head around the idea of a lucky coin or medal. But from here, things get a little... weird.

Houses in Ireland from at least the 14th century on through about the middle of the 19th century commonly have a horse skull - or more than one - set beneath the floor. They were supposed to bring luck - and also to improve the acoustics of the floor for dancing. Don't worry, no one was sacrificing horses to bury in their houses. It was simply the practice to save the skulls when horses died, for use in the next building constructed. Still, I think we can set this one aside when we're considering which traditions to make use of ourselves.

Filipinos, on the other hand, traditionally pour expensive wine in the excavation for the footings. And recommend that burying books in the foundation will lead to children who are wise, while sheet music will improve harmony in the home. These all sound like good ideas, but I'd probably rather drink the wine and read the book, myself. While sheet music seems to be an endangered species these days, as pianos start to dominate thrift stores. Which is another topic, and probably an actual rant - so I'll save that for another day.

Given that, historically, everything from "witch bottles" to horseshoes have been placed in homes for good luck or protection, you can probably think of your own lucky charm or sentimental object if you'd like to.

These lucky charms are often, just coincidentally, time capsules that give us a little glimpse into what life was like or who the people were who built a house. But it's also not uncommon to intentionally include a time capsule. Or even just tuck a letter to future owners of the house, from you, it's builder. And, while old newspapers were sometimes used for repair and insulation, only to become fascinating glimpses into the past when they are removed, later, you could make use of newspapers, too. You might have to make it a point to go buy a few, though. Gone are the days when nearly everyone got the daily paper. And then found all sorts of clever ways to repurpose all that leftover paper. Still, if you are building in a town that still has a small local paper, consider tucking a few sheets into the walls as the sheetrock goes on, as a surprise for someone in the future.

All right, so the foundation is set and cured, and the framing is going up. What now? While it doesn't seem to have been a historic habit, a new trend has developed in the last 10 to 20 years or so, of writing on the framing of a house as it is constructed. Usually these are bible verses, often chosen to be appropriate to the room in question. I'll include a lovely blog post in the show notes that has some excellent lists of verses to use, if you're so inclined. All it requires is a package of sharpies and some time.

Some folks even have "blessing parties," inviting friends, family, and church family over to help write out the verses, then enjoy a meal together as a way of coming together. I do really like this idea, in part because we've gotten away from the communal building of houses now that it is almost entirely the realm of the professional. This allows a small recapture of that community spirit. Different, and more participatory than a housewarming party, it helps tie the house and the family more firmly into the community. Just be sure the work site is safe, your contractor is OK with it, and your guests know where they may - and may NOT - write. I might skip this one if you have exposed beams, just so nobody accidentally "decorates" one of those!

Houses are part of a community. And we forget that in our modern age of contractors and subcontractors and hordes of people building our home that we may never see again. Always be kind to these people as they work on your future home. Consider bringing out a cooler of lemonade on hot days or an insulated carafe of coffee on a cold one. And think about asking them to "sign their work," if you will, in an inconspicuous spot. This will get more difficult as the finish work moves toward completion. But it will show them that you value them and the work of their hands - as you should! And

someone who is appreciated is that much more likely to give their best effort. Plus, you're leaving another clue for a future "house historian."

Not too long ago, my Dad (who is a frustrated fine carpenter, whose career diverted into IT instead), got to walk through a Frank Lloyd Wright house being restored. And his tour guides were a pair of elderly brothers - the original carpenters for the house. As they went from room to room, they told him all about how they had built each part. How this section of woodwork was hand pegged, and how those stairs were fitted. Think what a treasure that was to the contractor tasked with the restoration. Perhaps someday, the future owner of your house will be able to track down one of the young carpenters who worked on it, and get some insight before work is started on restoring it!

Another communal celebration and a way to show your appreciation is to follow the tradition of the "topping out" ceremony. Originally practiced by the Nordic countries, the tradition has spread throughout much of Europe, and is even observed in the building of sky scrapers. When the highest rafter is set, a small evergreen tree or branch is nailed to it. Originally meant to appease the tree spirits, it's now an outward sign that the framing is complete. Which means it is, once again, time for a party. Rather than removing the nail, the bulk of the tree is often cut away when the roof sheeting is laid. Which means that you can sometimes find the remains of that little snippet of evergreen still nailed to the rafter in some old houses.

The Dutch take things a step further. Dutch framers hang a regional or city flag from the rafters when they finish, and there it stays until the owner of the building provides pannenbier (literally, "roof-tile" beer). It's considered parsimonious in the extreme to make the workers wait for more than a day or two for their reward.

So think about holding a "topping out" ceremony when your house is being framed. Again, run it by your Contractor and make sure he's OK with it. But, if he is, show up on the day that framing finishes with subs, or barbeque or some other "thank you" meal for the crew. And make sure that the crews that did the earlier work know they can swing by for a bite, too. Although they may well be working on another project and unavailable.

Another way to tie your new home into your family or your community is to incorporate something into it that has some meaning. If you bought a piece of land that had, for instance, the remains of an old barn on it, see if there is a sound beam you can use as a

mantel or another portion that could be repurposed.

Perhaps you could design a fireplace surround of local fieldstone.

One of my disappointments in our project was that I missed out on one of these repurposing opportunities. One of the vernacular architectural styles here is the Veneklassen brick house. The Veneklassen brick company had two clay yards and made bricks of both a deep red and of a sandy ocher color. The Dutch immigrants used their extensive masonry skills to build the standard "Greek Revival" or 4 Square style house (along with a few other types), but did it using the two colors of bricks to work intricate patterns into the frieze, and around windows and doors. I (and a lot of other people) view them as something of a historical treasure. But, occasionally one reaches such a level of disrepair that it must come down. One did last year, but I was too late on the uptake to be able to acquire any of the bricks. I would dearly love for the fireplace and chimney of our new place to be made from real Veneklassen bricks. I will have to keep my ear to the ground on that one!

If you've reached the point now where all the lucky charms and time capsules are in place, all the meaningful scripture has been inscribed on the framing, historical or local materials integrated into the home, and various ceremonies and gatherings have taken place to bless the house, its builders, future occupants, and neighbors, it's time to name it!

You heard me right. I've talked before - and inevitably will again - about the importance of place. Why we have an ingrained need to love a place, and why we are better people when we do. Naming your home give it an emotional pull. Don't believe me? Green Gables. Plumfield. Falling Waters. Chatsworth. Balmoral. The Biltmore. The Breakers. South Fork. The King Ranch. Boone Hall.

Real or fictional, grand or humble, each name evokes a response. So do the names of many less famous houses. The cottage your family rented every summer. The home your grandparents lived in.

We lost the habit and art of naming houses when street addresses became the norm. But 167 Tulip Lane will never be as lovable an identifier as Rose Cottage.

Some places retained the practice, mostly out on the East Coast and anyplace where

beach or resort cottages are common. The little town I live in has whole strings of them with brightly painted signs hanging from porch ceilings declaring their names to passers-by.

It's high time we got back into the habit of naming our homes. Granted, it's an easier task if you're naming a home with some unique character, that sits on a plot of land that also has some originality to it. It's much harder (and more awkward) to attempt to affix such a moniker on a monoclonal suburban tract home that looks just like its neighbors. Although that can be done, with a little thought and an ability to shrug off the commentary of those neighbors, who often don't understand why you think YOUR home is special enough to need a name.

Where do you start?

You can, of course, name it after yourself. And, if you choose not to name it at all, most of your neighbors will probably hang such an appellation on it. I remember "The Warner Place" that my Dad still gives directions by. It may be "The Warner Place" for decades after the Warners have moved along.

If you prefer something less tied to your own name, look at the geography. Does your house sit on a rise? In a valley? Is it tucked among the trees? We bought a parcel that is utterly flat. So "Mockingbird Hill," is out, however much I like the song. As is anything with "Dale" or "Valley" or "Glen."

Local wildlife are another source of inspiration. We don't actually have Mockingbirds, so... We do, however, have hummingbirds, finches, rabbits, deer, and the occasional passing bear or eagle.

Consider the architecture of the house. Green Gables, after all, was named for that feature of the house. A house in town is called "The Tower House" after that particular feature.

Think about yourselves, and your personalities or goals. I drive by a property called "Salty Acres" regularly, and I always think to myself that the residents would probably be fun people to know.

Literary references are also a possibility. But you might want to avoid anything TOO

obvious. (Green Gables, for instance. Or Pemberley. Or Buckingham Palace - unless you're being tongue-in-cheek about it).

What is the history of the property? This might be something that will come into play more if you're building on family land, but it's worth investigating. Perhaps your parcel used to be the site of an old One Room School house, now gone. You might call it "Schoolhouse Corners." Or you've bought an old dairy farm whose buildings are no more, and built your own home there. Buttermilk acres?

If you're going to raise livestock or plants either as a business or a focused hobby farm, that might play into the name. Perhaps you'll live in Dahlia Dale or Sheepy Hollow.

That last suggestion aside, give careful thought to indulging in puns. Try to make sure it's something you'll continue to like as the years go by. Especially if you're going to have a sign made, declaring your name to all who pass by. You don't want to cringe every time you see it.

One last consideration on naming - if you're going to base a business on your property, whether online or on site, you'll want to take extra care in naming it. Before you commit, check domain names and social media to make sure that it isn't taken. You'll want your customers to be able to find you without a struggle. So, if you're thinking about Lilypond Lodge, and selling your hand made decor items on Etsy or Instagram, make sure to be sure the domain name lilypondlodge.com is available. Yes, you might still be able to grab "lilypondlodge.co," or .net, or .biz. But most people are going to first type .com - and if they end up at an unrelated site, or worse yet, a competitor's site, that isn't going to help you any. Also check Instagram handles, Etsy shop names, and whatever other social media you might want to use to promote yourself and your business.

And now, your house is built, it has a name, and your fancy new name sign has arrived and been installed in a place of honor.

Now it's time to move on to the housewarming. This is another community ritual that we've gotten out of the habit of doing. And it's true that the recently moved are usually still shuffling boxes around the house and trying to decide where to hang that painting.

Have a housewarming, anyway. And - you should be used to me saying this by now, too

- set it around a shared meal. Even if you're just laying out a buffet on the new kitchen counter. Consider incorporating some other traditions - bring into the house a loaf of bread, a new broom, and salt. The bread is to ensure the inhabitants never know hunger, the broom that it will always be well kept, and the salt for a flavorful life.

Light a candle while your guests are present - or light the first fire in the fireplace if the season is right - and "warm" the house in truth.

Once your guests are gone, and you're able to settle down into life in your new home, there are a few other things you should give some thought to doing.

First, take photos of the house, inside and out. Put them somewhere, along with a copy of the plans. Write up a little piece to go with it. Talk about the process of finding the property, designing the house, and what of the traditions we've been talking about you included. Tell the stories behind any historical elements you included in the house. Describe how you came up with the name. Leave a list of the main people who worked on the house - the designer, the builder, and any craftsmen that made specific contributions.

Include photos - and names - from housewarming parties, blessing parties, topping out ceremonies, or other events that helped christen your new home. Keep the whole packet in a fire safe, or a safety deposit box. Not only can it be passed to future owners, but should the worst happen, it will be extremely helpful when dealing with insurance companies.

At this point, I'll take a moment to address the "anywhere can be home" crowd. There are people who move every few years, either by preference or necessity. And this has generated a whole forest of listicles about how to make a new house a home, how to integrate into a new city, how to help your children adjust to moves, etc. Pop culture has romanticized leaving the hometown for the big city since the World War One days of "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm, now that they've seen Paris?" But too many people use this as a way to run from problems, or escape the pressure of the social guard rails that are there to keep communities from disintegrating - especially if it means not being able to do what they want to do without "judgement."

The truth is, the rootless, vagabond nature of modern life is damage both to individuals and to communities. We've gradually replaced networks of family and friends, or larger

community support systems with reliance on government assistance - to everybody's detriment. And the breakdown continues to accelerate it's pace.

We need a home on this Earth, even if we know it's temporary. Even pilgrims need a safe place to sleep on their journey. And being tied to a specific place makes us care about what happens to it. When we love a place, we're more interested in preserving places in general. When we are tied to a community, we maintain a greater ability to empathize with other people - even those who disagree with us.

Shedding community ties in favor of looser connections of "tribes" who think like we do makes us more self-absorbed, less sympathetic, and turns us into unpleasant people who perversely feel good about ourselves.

Does giving our house a name stop that?

Of course not.

But building a true home, and putting parts of ourselves into it, helps to root us. Bringing our friends and neighbors into the process helps ties us to them. Building a home that can become an integral part of the place we live in demonstrates our respect for that place. Answer me this - what seems more at home in a rural township? Rounding a bend in the road to see a butter yellow farmhouse under the arching branches of maple trees, on a small rise, white wooden fence parted at the driveway, with a brightly painted sign letting you know you have arrived at Jewelwood Acres? Or a subdivision abruptly cut into farm fields, with 60 freshly built houses all painted some shade of grey, with matching tiny decks attached to the backs, devoid of trees but with rubbermaid "sheds" pocking the postage stamp-sized yards? In which house would you expect a family to stay, even as changes inevitably accrue? Which house will see the kids move out - and then grandkids come back to swing on the tire swing or help Grandma collect eggs and feed the chickens? Which house is probably home to someone who sits on the township board? Or is a memory of the church consistory? Which will see tables set up under the maple trees and cars lining the road for a 50th anniversary party? Or a niece's outdoor wedding? One is an intentional place. The other is a location that will be a transitory space for a sequence of people to move temporarily through the community.

Places matter. And, romance of the Bohemian lifestyle aside, flitting from community to

community uproots our souls.

If you're in a position to build a home, weigh carefully issues of "resale" and "investment potential" against the idea of building something that you love. Building industry professionals will often counsel you against attempting to build a "forever" home, on the grounds that you never know what you may need in the future. And this is true. But with a little planning to account for some of the more likely changes life will bring your way, there is still value in trying to create a place you don't want to constantly escape from. Especially if you either have inherited family land, or have managed to find a perfect parcel in a community of which you are already strongly a part of. Home should be a place a refuge. If you can't afford to build your ideal refuge now, but do have the land, try to get someone really talented to design something that you can scale up as you need. Take inspiration from real farmhouses that have been added onto over the decades as the need arose.

Make your place in the world.

I hope you enjoyed this little foray into the world of house-related folklore - both historical and developing. If you did, do me a very large favor? And subscribe, rate, and review the podcast wherever you listen to it. It really does help other people find it if there are reviews. And it helps me to get good guests to interview. You're not stuck just listening to MY opinions. You can also help me out by sharing the podcast with people or groups you think might find it interesting. You can find it on all the major podcast apps, and also on the website at vintage.americana.podcast.com. I also invite you to visit the blog at BrambleberryMeadow.com. You can also follow me on instagram at [brambleberry_meadow](https://www.instagram.com/brambleberry_meadow), or follow the podcast at [vintage.americana.podcast](https://www.instagram.com/vintage.americana.podcast). If you do, say 'hi!' I love comments and DMs.

In the meantime, I'm going to go search for any reclaimed veneklasen bricks. And maybe looking for other fun things to add into the house. Better yet, I should go talk to Mom and Dad - maybe they have some thoughts.

Are you coming?

